Whatever you’re doing, whatever you’re proposing, make it as plausible as you know how to make it. And make sure that you’ve told everybody everything they need to know to consider whether or not they want to be part of your plans.”
Chuck Dolan needed a vacation.

During the nearly seven years since landing the cable franchise for lower Manhattan in 1965, the determined entrepreneur had been struggling to wire the southern half of the island with coaxial cable. Each day's battles seemed to confirm the truism that nothing in New York City is ever easy or inexpensive. Dolan's Sterling Communications had borrowed to the hilt to build out the franchise, and the pace of progress had given new meaning to the phrase "painfully slow."

Among other things, local politics were labyrinthine. To boot, movie theaters and broadcast television waged negative publicity campaigns against cable. And equipment proved to be temperamental—as did a few Sterling employees who occasionally exorcized their bad moods by sabotaging transmission. Profits were still beyond the horizon. The only consolation was that rival TelePrompTer, who was building out the northern half of the island, was having no better luck.

Ushering his wife and six children aboard the Queen Elizabeth II for a much-needed break, Dolan planned to use the ocean crossing to France to hammer out a plan that had been dancing in the back of his head for some time. He needed to craft an inspired vision of the future that would convince his main financial partner—Time Inc.—to help him take Sterling to the next level.

Squirreling himself away in a top bunk of the family's oceangoing quarters, Dolan tapped out a proposal on his old portable Underwood typewriter for an idea he dubbed The Green Channel. The 46-year-old entrepreneur's aspirations for the new programming enterprise were ambitious. He was proposing to create nothing less than "the Macy's of television," he wrote. The Green Channel would offer a cornucopia of programming designed to appeal to "some public, large or small." Dolan wanted to start on a regional basis and then use "whatever efficient transmission systems become available, from microwave to satellite" to sell television programs "worldwide to any public that signals its specific demands to us."

Unwilling to wait until he returned stateside to deliver the memo, Dolan tucked the proposal into an envelope and mailed it from Le Havre. When he and the rest of the Dolan clan arrived
back home, he eagerly anticipated that his proposal had struck his partner Time Inc. like a lightning bolt.

Instead, Dolan discovered to his dismay: "Nobody had read it."

A century before his own epic ocean voyage, Chuck Dolan’s paternal grandparents had made a similar journey—in the opposite direction. Grandfather David Joseph Dolan arrived in the United States from his native Ireland sometime in the 1860s. An “incident” involving a bridge and some British soldiers allegedly inspired the 17-year-old’s hasty departure from his homeland. (“A wild story,” chuckles Dolan. “Probably more fiction than fact.”)

Dolan’s grandmother, Corinne Henson, arrived in the United States at about the same time, but independent of her future husband. Both immigrants passed up the opportunity to settle in one of the major Eastern cities, preferring to push on to Ohio, where Cleveland beckoned. To underwrite her new life, Corinne set up a cart in Cleveland’s Public Square to hawk teas and spices to passers-by.

Three of Corinne Dolan’s sons—John, Thomas and David—inhertit the family’s entrepreneurialism . . . and something more: a gift for invention. By the time Chuck Dolan was born to David and Corinne Dolan in October 1926, his father and two uncles were all self-employed and busy conjuring up novelties of one sort or another. Says Dolan: “The joke in the family is that we’re not employable, so we have to work for ourselves.”

Of the three Dolan brothers, the one who perhaps enjoyed the most high-profile success was Thomas. The company of which he was founder and president—Dobeckmun—made a name for itself, first in the field of cellophane, and later by inventing metallic yarn in the 1940s. A street in Cleveland bears the company’s name. Dobeckmun today is a division of Dow Chemical.

David Dolan was also an inventor, but his focus was cars. “Cleveland was a great automobile manufacturing center in the ‘teens,” explains his son. Among his father’s inventions was the clutch-less transmission, which David Dolan cheerfully installed in the family’s car. “When I learned how to drive,” says Chuck Dolan, “it was in a car that didn’t have a clutch. I’d pull into a gas station and the attendants would just be amazed.

“Another of my father’s inventions,” says Dolan, “was something called the ‘lock wheel.’ If you turned the wheel of the car far enough in one direction, the wheels would lock and it would be safe from theft.”

Ford Motor bought the patent for the lock wheel and compensated Dolan with a wholesale distributorship in 13 states. But the Great Depression took its toll on car sales, and the business became a constant struggle. Chuck Dolan once noted that the family’s fortunes were not “hand-to-mouth, but we were not going anywhere for winter vacations.”

David Dolan died of cancer in 1943, at age 57, leaving behind a widow and four sons. Chuck Dolan was 16 and a student at Cleveland Heights High School. The teenager was already showing the family knack for creativity and business. His fascination, however, was not mechanisms and manufacturing, but the media. The year before his father died, Dolan sold the Cleveland Press on the idea of paying him $2 a week to write a column on local Boy Scout activities. More than a half-century later, he told a reporter that writing the column “was a celebrity of a kind I’d never known before.” Dolan
had more than enough material for his weekly column and talked the local radio station WHK into letting him and fellow Scouts stage a show during 15 minutes of air-time each Saturday morning.

"It was supposed to be a news program, but we turned it into a drama," recalls Dolan. "We would rehearse all week in the basement of my house—neighborhood kids, guys from the troop. We would create these little Scout dramas, and then would go down to the studio on Saturday morning to perform on-air, complete with sound effects. We had a wonderful time."

Print and radio weren't the only media that attracted Dolan's youthful attention. He had also fallen in love with film—a passion that would help fuel his idea for Home Box Office 40 years later. "Anything audio-visual engaged me," he once said. "In those days, you'd go to the movies without even knowing what was playing." One year for Christmas his parents bought him a 16mm DeVry film projector.

Dolan completed high school and went into the Air Force, just catching the tail end of World War II. When he got out of the service, he picked up where he left off, joining the Class of 1952 at John Carroll University, a Jesuit institution of which his uncle Thomas was both a trustee and benefactor. While in school, he tried to parlay his earlier radio experience into a freelance career by writing and selling his own radio scripts—a venture that he abandoned when he found few takers.

Better things awaited Dolan on campus. In a logic class, he met his future wife, Helen Burgess. They married in 1951 and launched a partnership that has lasted more than a half-century. The couple moved into a small apartment in Cleveland Heights, where they worked together on a sports reel business that Dolan started while still at John Carroll. In an echo of the mechanical blueprints that Dolan's father had hung all over the walls of the family home, footage from the week's sports events covered the young couple's kitchen.

"A freelancer would go film the game in 16mm and send the negative to us," explains Dolan. "Helen and I would then edit the reel in our kitchen. We pasted up the negative around the kitchen cabinets and then we would tape it together and write a script. Jimmy Dudley, Cleveland's number one play-by-play announcer, did the soundtrack for us."

The couple would then take their edited film to a local lab to have prints made. "After which we would drive the prints out to the airport and send them to stations" around the country, says Dolan. The Game of the Week enterprise was Dolan's first syndication deal.

The Dolans soon developed a routine. "We would spend Wednesday, Thursday and Friday selling our product to more stations," he says, "and then on the weekend we'd be back to filming the game and editing. We enjoyed it."

The venture, unfortunately, "didn't make much money," says Dolan. Just as the young couple came close to running out of cash, he picked up the phone.

Says Chuck Dolan: "The joke in the family is that we're not employable, so we have to work for ourselves."
“Telenews in New York City had a similar business,” he explains, “so I called them up and said, ‘I’ll trade you my affiliates for a job.’” Telenews agreed. The Dolans moved East and settled into a garden apartment in Tuckahoe, New York.

Chuck Dolan worked for Telenews for a couple of years, becoming more and more involved in the company’s syndication business. “They had me producing film subjects, mostly sports out of the Telenews film library,” he says. “We syndicated it through a company called Sterling Television, an early syndicator. I left Telenews to start up a new Industrial Film Division for Sterling. We took film from industrial commercial sources and turned it into product that television stations could use.”

After Sterling acquired an existing company called Movies USA, Dolan and a partner, Sophie Hohne, bought out the owner of Sterling, Saul Turell, and went into business themselves. The company—dubbed Sterling Movies USA—specialized in helping industrial clients reach their target audiences with films, usually by playing them to groups gathered at convention hotels in New York City.

It didn’t take long for Dolan to realize that he would have a real business on his hands if he could connect “hotels together and originate a film in one place,” he says. Among other things, he could offer other kinds of content to hotel clients—not merely industrial films. One such offering was TeleGuide, a service which allowed hotels in the city to receive local information of interest to conventioneers visiting the Big Apple. It was while wiring a hotel to pick up the TeleGuide signal that Dolan noticed something intriguing: the coaxial cable he was installing supplied better reception than the hotel’s master antenna. A lightbulb went on in his head.

At the time of Dolan’s revelation about the power of coax, the nation’s cable television industry was still small and mainly rural. Few industry pioneers considered cities a viable market. But in New York City, as Dolan quickly learned, tall buildings provided an obstacle to signal reception as challenging as any hilly or mountainous terrain. Even powerful rooftop antennae only took care of a portion of the problem.

When the telephone company informed him that he needed the city’s permission to do large-scale cabling, Dolan quietly applied to the city’s Board of Estimate in 1964 to secure the right to wire Manhattan.

Given the Board’s ignorance on the subject (“Nobody even knew what cable was,” Dolan recalled. “You had to explain it to them.”), Sterling’s owner assumed that approval would be relatively easy to obtain. But the World Telegram & Sun published an article about the franchise and within two weeks 14 additional applications poured in. Dolan’s chance to be a shoo-in dissolved before his eyes. “What I thought would be routine turned into full-blown competition,” says Dolan about the bidding process. “The other 14 came from everywhere. People we had never heard of before . . . and haven’t heard of since.”

His most formidable competitor was TelePrompTer, a local company headed by the peripatetic Irving Kahn. Like Dolan, Kahn saw potential for cable in urban areas and wanted to get in on the action in his own backyard. When the award was made—18 long months after Dolan’s initial application—Sterling and TelePrompTer split the island between them: Dolan wound up with the southern half, Kahn with the northern.

If Dolan thought that the franchise process was tough sledding, construction of the actual system made the earlier ordeal look like a walk in the park. Installing cable underground in lower Manhattan’s maze of buildings was a nightmare. With wry understatement Dolan notes: “It was grossly underestimated by everybody, including us. Then, we were a small
and dedicated team. John Tatta led the construction effort. Thirty-five years later, John is still with us, and a member of the Cablevision board.”

Dolan scrambled for money to keep the construction process going. He took on partners, including William Lear of Lear Jet and Elroy McCaw, a radio entrepreneur in Seattle (and father of Craig McCaw). But Dolan soon realized that deeper pockets—on a corporate scale—were required. With McCaw’s critical help, they convinced Time Inc. to buy 20 percent of Sterling Communications—the subsidiary formed for the project—for $1,250,000.

By the middle of 1967, two years into the installation, the partners had spent $2 million and reached only 400 customers. Time Inc. and Sterling turned to Chase Manhattan for more money. The bank agreed to a $10 million loan, but stipulated that certain benchmarks be met. It was willing to supply $5 million immediately, but Sterling had to reach 12,500 customers before any more money would be released. McCaw and Lear decided it was an appropriate time to exit and sold their interest to Time Inc., leaving the publisher with nearly 50 percent ownership of Sterling Communications.

Dolan realized that he needed to pull a rabbit out of the proverbial hat to bolster subscriber rolls and keep his partner happy. In 1968, he worked out a deal with Madison Square Garden to carry the Knicks and Rangers play-offs. It cost Sterling all of $24,000.

“All the home games were blacked out,” explains Dolan. “The broadcast stations didn’t carry them because the Garden was worried about jeopardizing box office receipts. But our circulation was so modest in Manhattan that they were willing to make a deal. We worked it out with Ned Irish, for the play-off games that year.”

As part of the deal, Sterling agreed to buy any unsold arena seats. The games were a sell-out, so Dolan didn’t have to pay a dime. The Garden was happy, and so was Dolan.

Sterling’s customers were delighted too. “I remember walking down Third Avenue and every bar was filled to overflowing,” says Dolan. “They were all wired for cable and showing the games that people couldn’t see on regular broadcast television. It was wonderful. So the next year we struck a full-season contract with the Garden.”

In July 1969, Dolan reached Chase Manhattan’s required subscriber level. In the meantime, Time Inc. had dug into its own pockets to kick out short-term loans. The company also decided that it wanted a bigger share of the partnership. After months of back-and-forth, Dolan and Time struck a deal on New Year’s Eve 1969. Dolan agreed to give up 44.5 percent of Sterling Information Services—the parent company of Sterling Communications—in exchange for continued loans. Future loan amounts would also be convertible into more equity in the parent company.

Maintaining Time’s enthusiasm, while building on the success of the Garden scheme, were both on Dolan’s mind when he shepherded his wife, three sons and three daughters aboard the
QEII in the summer of 1971 for a family vacation. When Dolan returned from his voyage and discovered that no one at Time had read his inspired memorandum, he refused to give up. He requested time to present his concept to Time's executives in November.

Among those in attendance was Andrew Heiskell, Time Inc.'s chairman, and James Shepley, the company's president. Dolan laid out his vision of a sports-and-movie channel for subscribers in Manhattan and syndicated to other cable systems across the country. He watched Heiskell for signs of reaction, but the chairman gave no indication of what he thought of Dolan's presentation. Just before leaving the room, Heiskell scribbled a note and handed it to Shepley. In it, he gave Dolan the green light—and $300,000—to launch The Green Channel.

Dolan began by assembling a small team, including marketer Tony Thompson of Time Inc. and lawyer Jerry Levin. The trio conducted a market survey to gauge potential subscriber interest. The initial feedback was depressing: only 1.2 percent of those queried expressed enthusiasm. The concept fared much better in face-to-face interviews, where half the respondents said, "yes."

The theoretical existence of an audience for The Green Channel was encouraging news. The next step was to find programming that would turn at least a portion of that 50 percent into real subscribers. Here The Green Channel team faced its biggest challenge. Local theaters and broadcast television—ever suspicious of cable—did their best to deep-six Dolan's plans by waging anti-cable campaigns in the media and local government offices. To boot, film studios expressed not only skepticism, but reluctance to appear to be in cahoots with an "enemy" of their theater colleagues. After months of putting out brush fires, Dolan's team managed to smooth over the local politics, and Universal Studios agreed to supply a few films to get the ball rolling. The first movie to air would prove in retrospect to be an apt choice: Sometimes a Great Notion, starring Paul Newman.

Although movies would become the main fare of The Green Channel—re-christened Home Box Office—the channel's historic debut in November 1972 involved a sports event: a hockey game featuring the Canucks and Rangers. Getting the hockey contest on the air was as fraught with challenges as every other aspect of the channel's brief existence.

Cable pioneer John Walson agreed to let Dolan use his Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania system for the inaugural broadcast. But the town had been devastated by the worst flood in its history a few months earlier when Hurricane Agnes hammered the Eastern seaboard in June 1972. Downtown Wilkes-Barre had seen nine feet of water rush down the town's main street. Workers had to shovel mud out of the building in which the fledgling channel planned to make its headquarters. On November 8—the day of the broadcast—the weather echoed the earlier disaster. Rain pelted the town and strong winds blew down the microwave dish. A staff member had to climb the tower and hold the dish in place while getting drenched and chilled to the bone. In spite of it all, the broadcast was a success. HBO had secured its place in history.

"History" was also the operative term for the partnership between Dolan and Time. After eight years, the relationship between the two had run its course. In March 1973, Time took advantage of earlier loan terms to exercise its option to buy out Dolan. Jerry Levin was tapped to take over for the departing chief of Sterling, who walked away with a payment of $675,000. HBO remained with Time.

"Time and Sterling would have occasional differences of opinion," says Dolan graciously, "but Time was in every way a strong partner. The people over there were superb."
All business dealings between Time Inc. and Dolan appeared to be at an end. In less than a year, Time decided to exit cable entirely, and worked out a deal to sell its properties to Warner, who was just getting started in the field. Dolan, who was in Las Vegas exploring subscription television possibilities, got a call from Time's counsel, Frank Randolph, about the impending sale and hurried back to New York City to see if he could get in on the action. He arrived in the nick of time. A contract for the sale had been signed by Warner, but not by Time Inc. One reason for the delay was Time's irritation that Warner refused to take the problematic Manhattan properties as part of the deal. James Shepley, Time's president, agreed to give Dolan a chance to get a small piece of the transaction—the Nassau system on Long Island for $900,000. He told him to “show up here in the morning with a check for $100,000 and a note for the balance,” recalls Dolan. Dolan scrambled to arrange the financing and returned the next day with the requested check.

“That was the beginning of Cablevision Systems Corporation,” says Dolan, with characteristic understatement.

If the world thought Dolan would now be content running a small cable system for the rest of his life, the 47-year-old had other ideas. His experience in Manhattan had been an intense, if frustrating, classroom. During the next three decades, he would show that he had been an A+ student during those tough years. His new company would be the beneficiary of every marketing, financing and programming insight he had picked up along the way.

Determined not to be strapped for cash, Dolan quickly arranged for an infusion from Jerrold Electronics' new GI Credit Corp. Never again did he want someone else to hold the purse strings and call the shots. The arrangement worked so well that Dolan requested more financing from GI. The young GI executive who delivered the next round of papers for Dolan to sign was none other than John Malone. “I had never met him before,” says Dolan. “That was John's initial role in the cable industry.”

Dolan's next major move, in 1976, was to create a regional sports network, SportsChannel. The man who had meticulously hand-taped film strips of the week's big games together in his kitchen 25 years earlier knew in his bones that sports would be a perennial source of fascination, local pride . . . and revenues. As Cablevision expanded its holdings over the years, he replicated the formula in other areas of the country.

Sports were only part of Dolan's programming plans, however. Although he had left HBO behind when he exited his partnership with Time, he had not parted ways with the expansive vision laid out in his famous shipboard memo-writing exercise. While many of his MSO peers stuck to the strategy of accumulating systems in the 1970s and 1980s, Dolan divided his energy between the era's franchising battles and launching new networks and programming. In 1980, Dolan teamed up with Bill Daniels of Daniels & Associates to form Rainbow Media Holdings,
Inc. Rainbow would become home to such programming powerhouses as American Movie Classics (AMC), Bravo, WE: Women’s Entertainment (formerly Romance Classics), Independent Film Channel (IFC) and muchmusic usa.

On a symbolic level, Rainbow was Dolan’s childhood love of all things audio-visual writ large. It was also a simple case of pragmatism.

“Cablevision has never been able to depend on growing by the ‘chase the truck’ syndrome—customers who are so eager for better reception that they flag down cable company vans to sign up,” explains Dolan. “Because we have operated in areas with good over-the-air reception, we’ve always had to sell our services to people who didn’t necessarily need them. We had to create something that people would want. So, we’ve always been content oriented, not conduit oriented. Our reputation in the industry for being a maverick isn’t because that’s our personality, it’s because of our circumstances.”

Thinking big—whether in programming or otherwise—usually brings a commensurately large price tag, and Dolan’s vision for Cablevision and Rainbow was no exception. He had learned a great deal from his Manhattan days, including the Golden Rule: he who has the gold, rules. With the help of a Chicago tax lawyer, Dolan raised money for Cablevision by tapping into the public appetite for tax shelter investments in the early 1980s. (Later, Dolan would use junk bonds, then straight debt financing.) Much of the money to wire suburban New York City came from real estate syndication deals in which investors received a high return until they recouped their original investment plus a premium. As the investors’ equity fell, Dolan’s increased.

The true financial reward for Dolan personally came in 1986, when he took Cablevision public. By September 1984, Dolan had bought out his tax-shelter investors to the tune of $80 million, many of whom walked away not only with huge tax breaks, but also five-to-one returns on their original investments. Sixteen months later, Dolan took the company public at $14.50 a share. He was now able to buy out many of his investors and access the public equity and debt markets for future growth. Of Dolan’s financial wizardry, one observer noted: “Watching Dolan do his thing in the 1970s and ’80s has been more educational than any ten programs on PBS. Watching him work in the 1990s should be even more interesting.”

The comment proved to be prescient. With its IPO behind it, Cablevision embarked on an eye-popping $1 billion spending spree in 1988 and 1989. Part of the money was earmarked for buying up other major Long Island operators and consolidating his other Northeast cable operations. Dolan’s long-term game plan for consolidating cable systems in the New York City metropolitan area had begun in earnest.

But geographic wheeling-and-dealing wasn’t the only thing on Dolan’s radar screen. As much as $900 million of Cablevision’s deals in the late 1980s were tied up in major transactions with General Electric and focused on Dolan’s first love: programming. Among other things, GE’s NBC network bought a half-interest in Dolan’s channels for $137 million in 1988, and in return Dolan walked away with a half-interest in CNBC.

Cablevision’s bold moves in 1988 and 1989 were quickly followed by a period of walking on a financial tightrope. The U.S. cable market nosedived, and the company’s debt—$2.1 billion—loomed large for the times. On paper the company showed a net worth of minus $571 million. The stock price hovered near a two-year low.

Dolan, however, wasn’t one for worrying about what he considered a short-term problem. Keeping the big picture in mind had always been one of his strengths. Staying calm where others panic is also a typical trait. It helped, too, that
Dolan had taken care to see that his family was largely buffered from whatever might befall the company. No doubt memories of his own childhood's financial ups and downs helped fuel his thinking. The tiny garden apartment in Tuckahoe, New York had long ago been traded for, among other things, a house on Long Island Sound.

Even as Dolan displayed a knack for making carefully calculated moves and executing shrewd deals, he retained all the quiet charm and lack of pretension that had always been his personal trademarks.

"Here's a guy who is a very tough businessman," says Decker Anstrom, former president of NCTA. "But if you were to sit next to him at dinner, he is one of the most charming, polite, low key people you'll ever meet. Chuck is just not very interested in the public limelight."

"Don't mistake [Dolan's] gentlemanship for being an easy negotiator," said Tom Rogers, president of NBC Cable in 1998. "...or not being tough as nails when he has to be. Sometimes the mistake people make with Chuck is they don't know how to deal with how creative he is. He is not linear. That baffles people who mistake it for him being too tough or grabbing too much."

"Too tough" was precisely what some people thought Dolan was in September 1988 during a dispute with Madison Square Garden over carriage terms. Angry viewers picketed Cablevision's headquarters. "Our home telephone was ringing in the middle of the night with people harassing us," said Dolan at the time. The sports press pilloried him. Eventually the dispute was settled, largely on Dolan's terms, but it served as a lightning rod for growing discontent among cable subscribers nationwide. The incident was paraded before Congress as an example of the cable industry's cavalier attitude. Dolan responded by noting calmly and quietly that the controversy was more complex than angry headlines and finger-pointing suggested.

Four years later, Dolan's detractors no doubt enjoyed the negative press that Cablevision received for its role in a joint venture with NBC to offer pay-per-view broadcasts of the 1992 Summer Olympics. Dubbed "Olympic TripleCast," the project lost $50 million for Cablevision. Cablevision and NBC had overestimated what viewers would be willing to pay for special packages of commercial-free coverage when they could see events for free on regular broadcast. Around the same time, Dolan settled a lawsuit filed by investors in an earlier cable limited partnership, and tangled with the Internal Revenue Service, who claimed that he owed $234 million in back taxes. The I.R.S. ended up paying Dolan a refund.

If anyone thought that such issues would sideline Dolan, they miscalculated. He simply rolled with the punches. In 1993, after re-regulation of the cable industry took a heavy toll on valuations, he dismissed an offer by US West to buy his cable properties, signaling that he was anything but ready to throw in the towel. When the landmark Bell Atlantic-TCI deal (later canceled) was announced that same year, Dolan's response was telling: "Time is of the essence because you
can’t sit around ... forever. Otherwise all the decisions will be made for you. So you better stay ahead of the game. The drift unmistakably is to consolidation, concentration.”

The fifth largest MSO in the country at the time, Cablevision intended to be one of those still standing when the consolidation game was over. In 1993, the company had 2.1 million subscribers spread across 19 states, more than half of them located in the tri-state area of New York, Connecticut and New Jersey. Dolan turned the trend toward industry concentration to good account in the 1990s by selling Cablevision clusters in Cleveland and Boston and further strengthening the company’s New York area presence. His heart might be in programming, but Dolan saw no reason to give up his masterfully-assembled geographic base.

“On the other hand,” Dolan the deal-maker notes wryly, “we’ve always said, ‘Hey, if somebody comes along and makes an attractive enough offer, we’ll sell.’ But that hasn’t happened yet.”

While the rest of the cable industry fretted over re-regulatory woes and a few pioneers decided the time was right to exit in the mid-1990s, Dolan was happily occupied launching something that would initially—as usual—raise eyebrows among cable peers, but ultimately win their admiration. Cablevision began promoting an “a la carte” approach to marketing its programming. Dolan’s strategy flew in the face of conventional cable marketing.

“Chuck Dolan clearly saw that the value in the cable business was not about pipes and satellite beams,” says industry consultant Kathy Wallman. “It was about content and programming. How you could make content valuable, interesting and affordable to customers. One of the hallmarks of his thinking about programming has been Cablevision’s a la carte approach that allows customers maximum flexibility. Instead of saying, ‘Here’s our platinum package. You get two channels of ESPN, like it or not,’ his approach has allowed customers to put together whatever kind of package they wanted and pay a per channel fee to do it.”

“Talk about a pioneer,” says Paul Maxwell. “Dolan might well be the smartest marketing and packaging guy ever to work in the business. Most of the real innovations in how you sell something and how you position cable in the marketplace have grown out of his fertile imagination.

“Look at the stuff he’s doing in the New York market now,” continues Maxwell, “with what amounts to micro-channels. Not small niche channels, but tiny niche channels, like traffic. He’s taken the concept of space on the spectrum and used tinier and tinier parts of it to reach more and more targeted audiences. It’s like creating a magazine stand, offering things by category, and then taking it down another niche. He’s emulating both radio and target publications at the same time. And he’s making it work.”

Cablevision is, in fact, promoting a new service modeled on a tried-and-true concept in print publications. Not coincidentally, its name is MagRack.

“MagRack is true niche programming,” says Dolan. “We’re creating services that are addressed to a very specific audience interest—subjects ranging from motorcycling to weddings to wine tasting. But instead of making it a 24/7 channel, we load the content into the server. So if a customer’s cable system is equipped for video-on-demand, he or she can simply go to MagRack, look up a subject of interest, hit the button and the programming will play. Right now, we only have it on three systems, but response has been great. We’re up to 35 subjects now and we’re going to do many more.”

Dolan’s upbeat focus on what lies ahead is typical. Even in the face of the dot-com bust, assorted corporate scandals
and the general malaise of the economy, he maintains both a sense of humor and broad perspective. When asked about Cablevision’s current strategy, Dolan says dryly: “It’s a good time to stick to your business.”

For Cablevision, that philosophy translates into maintaining a focus on “where the company’s heart is,” says Dolan: content. While retaining ownership of such high-profile Big Apple properties as Madison Square Garden and Radio City Music Hall—both of which offer wonderful content opportunities—the company has opted to jettison ventures that are not so near and dear: Cablevision’s recently-acquired cellular phone licenses, for example, plus the “The Wiz” retail chain.

“In this day and age when there is not enough capital money available for speculative projects with a long horizon,” says Dolan, “we finally had to give those up. The wireless phone business, for example, requires a great deal of capital, but the whole phone sector is down right now, so we thought it best to sell the licenses while we could.

“As for The Wiz,” continues Dolan, “we still like the concept, but to be in the consumer electronics business, you really need to be totally dedicated to it. The people who are in it totally live the business. It’s not something that’s easy to run if your principal activity is something else. Plus, the sector is bad right now. Nobody is doing well in it.”

In spite of the disappointment inherent in scaling back some of Cablevision’s more intriguing ventures, Dolan remains enthusiastic about the future. For one thing, the expensive rebuild that the cable industry undertook in the late 1990s is over. “We spent on the order of $4 to $5 billion upgrading the New York system,” says Dolan. “The reward is that it’s now all 750 Mhz and 860 Mhz and has video-on-demand throughout. It’s everything you could want a cable system to be.

“But the upgrade—for us—is just background to the content idea,” continues Dolan. “Rainbow is very active with new product that they’ve already launched, and new product that they’re preparing to launch. And we’re also pursuing the idea of extending our distribution reach via satellite. We’ve always had to depend on cable systems and other satellite companies to distribute our programming. We’d like to be able to distribute it ourselves to the national market, as well as to cable operators and other satellite people.” Any resemblance to Dolan’s original vision for The Green Channel is more than purely coincidental.

Another aspect of Cablevision’s future that clearly pleases Dolan is the prospect of having his son Jim at the company’s helm for many years to come. Chuck Dolan has already had the pleasure of watching his progeny mature into one of the cable industry’s best-recognized personalities. Like industry contemporary Brian Roberts, Jim Dolan learned his way around his father’s company by handling a variety of assignments.

“When Jim was in high school,” says Dolan, “he was working on the loading dock at the cable...
company. He’s run systems. He’s been a collections person. He’s been a salesman. And he’s run the programming side. There’s hardly a job in the company that he hasn’t had. I think Jim is a very capable cable person and getting better at it all the time.”

The two other Dolan sons also joined the family’s corporate fold years ago. “Pat runs News 12,” says Dolan. “He’s a journalist and that’s all he wants to run. Tom is our data guy. He runs the information side of things. All three of the boys relate pretty well to one another, which is something that is gratifying to see.”

Although the company he founded clearly occupies most of Chuck Dolan’s attention, he has made time—like many other members of The Entrepreneurs Club—to establish a family foundation devoted to philanthropy. Quick to characterize the foundation as “minor” in scale, Dolan notes that its focus is education and medicine—two areas which Chuck and Helen Dolan and their six children agreed upon from the outset. The institutions that benefit from the Dolans’ generosity are organizations with which the family has had some association over the years.

“For example, John Carroll University is where Helen and I met,” explains Dolan, “so giving to them has been important. Our daughters went to Fairfield University in Connecticut, so we’ve known that institution for a long time. And St. Francis Hospital is in our community.

“All of our children are on the board of the foundation,” says Dolan, “and they make the decisions. Everybody in the family is part of it.”

Not surprisingly, after more than 50 years in business, Dolan has a few bits of wisdom to pass along to up-and-coming entrepreneurs. The first and “obvious one,” he says, “is your credibility. Whatever you’re doing, whatever you’re proposing, make it as plausible as you know how to make it. And make sure that you’ve told everybody everything they need to know to consider whether or not they want to be part of your plans. That includes whether they’re investing, coming to work for you, or subscribing to your service. Be believable.

“The second thing I would counsel is to drill down, so you have as much information as you can possibly have to help you,” continues Dolan. “Third, find good people to work with, good people to be part of your group. And, then, when you have them on board, relate to them well. Make sure that they’re being encouraged to contribute. Do that mainly by appreciating them and recognizing the value of what they’re doing.”

Although Dolan wraps up his advice with the demurrer that “it’s not very original,” most people would be only too happy to enjoy the level of success that Cablevision’s founder has achieved by following such “unoriginal” rules.

One very early fan would be particularly pleased by the prosperity that has resulted from Dolan’s discipline:

“At the least evidence of human intelligence,” Chuck Dolan told *Hibernia* magazine in 1999, “my Aunt Mary Henson would beam, ‘Charles, you are going to be a millionaire some day.’

“For Aunt Mary,” laughs Dolan, “becoming a millionaire was better than becoming a saint.”
Dolan started Cablevision Systems Corporation in the early 1970s with a hastily-arranged deal to buy the Nassau system on Long Island for $900,000 from his former partner, Time Inc. Time's James Shepley told Dolan to "show up here in the morning with a check for $100,000 and a note for the balance." Dolan scrambled to arrange the financing and returned the next day with the down payment.

In March 1997, Dolan announced that Cablevision was purchasing a majority interest in Madison Square Garden Properties. The deal included the MSG arena complex, the Knicks, Rangers and MSG Network. In the late 1960s, Dolan had kicked off his career in cable programming by arranging to show blacked-out Knicks and Rangers play-off games to his New York City cable customers to boost his new cable company's subscriber base.
Jim and Chuck Dolan on stage at Radio City Music Hall in October 1999, following a $70 million, seven-month restoration of the Big Apple icon. The event also marked the launch of the Lustgarten Foundation for Pancreatic Cancer Research. One of Dolan’s most trusted lieutenants, Marc Lustgarten, died of the disease two months earlier after a long struggle.

Chuck and Helen Dolan (center) met at John Carroll University as undergraduates more than 50 years ago. On June 15, 2001, the couple joined other JCU dignitaries in breaking ground for the new Charles F. and Helen B. Dolan Center for Science and Technology. The Dolans’ gift of $20 million to begin construction of the Center was the largest ever received by the school.